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Aspirational circus glamour: rethinking the circus grotesque through female aerialists of the inter-war period

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author challenges the designation of circus and circus disciplines, including aerial performance, as grotesque. The term 'glamour' was used in inter-war newspaper reports and more accurately describes circus in this period. The fundamental difference between the two concepts relies on the experience generated in the audience: glamour is aspirational whereas the grotesque provokes derision. It is likely they have been confused by scholars because both rely on transformation, excess and transgression. The author discusses these three principles to conclude how circus glamour works differently from the grotesque, including how glamour pushes at the boundaries of what is acceptable within the dominant culture rather than upturning the established order. The most aspirational of circus stars of the 1920s was the female aerialist whose aerial movement inspired a positive fantasy within audience members. By analysing aerial action alongside newspaper reports, memoirs, and publicity images that glorified aerialists Lillian Leitzel and Luisita Leers, the author argues that aerialists generated and were protected by affluent circus glamour.

KEYWORDS

Aerial performance; aerialist; circus; glamour; grotesque; 1920s; carnivalesque; Bakhtin

Circus in the 1920s and early 1930s was a glamorous enterprise. Yet, it is more common to see circus, or performers who appeared in the circus ring such as aerialists, described in scholarship using the language of the grotesque or carnival (Russo 1994; Assael 2005). These approaches show a clear debt to Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival theory in which he describes circus as one of the places where 'the character [of the grotesque] has been most fully preserved' (1984, 353). However, there is a problem with reading all circuses as grotesque when inter-war contemporaries described circus performances as glamorous and when the largest circuses of the era, and specialist acts within those circuses, were represented in terms of glorification. The fundamental difference between glamour and the grotesque is founded upon the mode of experience each generates in the audience: glamour is unusual and produces a powerful allure that is aspirational, whilst the grotesque is disturbing and provokes derision.

The reason the grotesque and glamour are often confused is because they both rely on transformation, excess and transgression. What separates them is the way in which these

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three elements work differently to inspire the distinct responses of glamour's aspiration and the grotesque's derision. Where the 'essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation' (Bakhtin 1984, 19), glamour is a 'sophisticated ... allure' (Dyhouse 2011, 1). It creates 'wonder and envy' and is often part of a 'strategy of seduction and persuasion of an industry, a medium, or an institution' (Gundle 2008, 6). Glamour's seduction, that produces its allure, is a process of glorification that elevates the bearer and results in desire. The glamorous star is to be aspired to, whereas the grotesque object provokes repulsion or derision to some degree.

The female aerialist, who interacts with suspended equipment such as trapeze or *corde lisse* (rope), epitomises circus glamour because experiencing aerial action from below provokes a transformative fantasy within the body and the mind (Tait 2005, 146). Contra to this, Mary Russo has interpreted the female aerialist as grotesque because the freedoms she offers rely on the body never quite leaving the physical world behind in the quest for transcendental freedom (1994, 29). This reading of the female aerialist sets up a false opposition that situates the mind as always higher than the body. It ignores the positive power of an experience that uses the kinaesthetic system to promise freedom through both body *and* mind. In this article I discuss the kinaesthetic fantasy of aerial action in conjunction with publicity photographs of the aerialists Lillian Leitzel and Luisita Leers,¹ together with evidence from newspaper reports and memoirs to designate aerial stars as glamorous. In doing so, I question interpretations of the circus aerialist as grotesque. What emerges from this gender-focused analysis of aerial movement and primary sources is the power of the largest circuses to glorify and glamorise unusual bodies.

The misrepresentation of circus acts as grotesque has significant implications because it places the circus in a carnivalesque relationship to society. Bakhtin's theory considers carnival as a 'temporary liberation from ... the established order' that can result in 'great changes' because it 'offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world' (1984, 11, 49, 34). Rather than being situated within the world, it is a 'second life' apart, where the rules governing ordinary life are temporarily put on hold (Bakhtin 1984, 6). The problem with how a life apart can interact within the world if it stands separate, has led subsequent scholars to reconceptualise the grotesque as a 'low-Other' of symbolic inversion that confuses the relationship between high and low, allowing the grotesque and carnival to have political implications within the world (Stallybrass and White 1986; Russo 1994). Although these developments of Bakhtin's theory consider grotesque images to have the potential to provoke change, this change always happens through and at the margins, not at the centre.

The largest circuses of the 1920s and early 1930s were glamorous, not carnivalesque, because they were a significant component of mainstream culture. Companies such as Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Combined Show and Bertram Mills Circus were the largest mass live entertainments in the USA and UK respectively² – these were enterprises that were a central part of culture and not marginal. Unlike carnival and the grotesque, glamour enacts change from within. It is by appropriating wealth to generate status that glamour has the power to reframe what borders on transgressive as acceptable. Stephen Gundle persuasively considers glamour to have begun 'precisely as a refashioning for new times and new purposes of the exterior glitter that the nobility had sought to reserve to itself to affirm its social and economic superiority' (2008, 27).³ Glamour draws its power and authority from the external surfaces of wealth to elevate the bearer and create a sense of wonder or awe in the person experiencing them. Where the grotesque creates change

through upturning the established order, glamour works within dominant culture to reframe what is acceptable by appropriating the surfaces of capitalist wealth.

Newspaper reports from the 1920s explicitly describe circus as glamorous: the Ringling-Barnum circus ‘has its own glamour of romance’ (‘Positively Not a Sex Play’ 1922); whilst a London journalist considered Bertram Mills Circus to have nostalgically reinvigorated a lost era of circus glamour: ‘The word ‘circus’ recalls for many of us scenes of glamour and wonderment that are dim memories’ (‘International Circus at Olympia’ 1921). It is this British journalist’s connection of glamour and wonderment within the circus that is particularly significant because wonderment or awe is the experience generated by circus and glamour: circus is glamorous. The following extract from the trade publication, *Billboard*, emphasises the expensive and luxurious surfaces of the costumes on display at the Ringling-Barnum circus:

Soft silks and satins, filmy, billowy and bouffant tulles, graceful, swaying ostrich plumes and swishy feather skirts. Ropes of pearls and scintillating crystals, glistening amber jewels and flashing jet. Enormous and gorgeous headdresses of pearls and diamonds, of silver and gold cloths and jewels, or softly waving plumes ... simply dazzling. (Bennett 1930)

The awe in the final words ‘simply dazzling’ links the decadent materials to the experience they create; this display glorifies and creates wonder through its affluent excess. It simultaneously seduces the senses with the range of textures and materials whilst confirming its power through the wealth it displays.

Through the demonstration of virtuosity, most circus practices dazzle like the flashy materials of the Ringling-Barnum circus. It is only some clown acts that rely on the grotesque inversion of hierarchies that aligns with the carnivalesque. 1920s circus programmes were filled with acts that were displays of skill and control or that were framed as spectacular or extraordinary. Typically, programmes might include the skilful clown provoking laughter from the audience through a body that expertly exaggerates movement or performs pratfalls; the extraordinary bodily skill of muscular strength and control demonstrated by equestrians, acrobats, aerialists and strongmen/women; awe-inspiring control (both visible and invisible to the audience) of some men and women over horses and domestic or exotic wild animals; or the exceptional risk a person might undergo when being shot out of a cannon. Most of these acts placed the bodies of those performing at risk, but most audience members would consider these performances well beyond their ability to replicate. The sort of responses these acts elicited from audience members included laughter, thrill and wonder.

Performing acts of apparent weightlessness above the audience using rings, ropes and trapeze, 1920s female aerial stars were at the top of the circus hierarchy (Kline 2008, 118).⁴ The most prestigious circus celebrity of the period was the aerialist Lillian Leitzel whose life was described as containing ‘glamour’ by one memoir writer (O’Brien 1959, 121). Leitzel worked for Ringling Bros, the most globally significant circus enterprise of the era, appearing in one of their circuses every summer season from 1915 until her death in February 1931 (Parkinson 1971). Like other aerialists she secured year-round employment through bookings in American vaudeville, other international circuses such as Bertram Mills Circus, and European variety. She herself described the ‘glamour of my act’ (in Bradshaw 1931, 16), indicating she understood her aerial action as being a key component in creating her glamour. As I will show, the allure generated by aerial movement is a transformative fantasy founded on how aerial action is perceived within the body and mind.

Fantasies of transformation

Aerial performance creates an aspirational response within the person witnessing aerial action. It allows the body rooted on the ground to imagine itself performing weightless movements in a space above that is imagined as free (Tait 2005, 151). The same desire for freedom is at the heart of glamour, because it is ‘a desire for something out of the ordinary’ – ‘a dream of escape’ (Dyhouse 2011, 4). Experiencing aerial action activates one of the oldest dreams of escape, that stretches back at least as far as Ovid’s tale of Icarus and Daedalus: the desire to fly free of worldly constraints and experience the freedom of unmechanised flight. Part of glamour’s allure is that the affluence it uses to confirm its authority promises freedom from the many constraints that money and work enforce upon life. The desire for glamour is a desire to be transformed into occupying this exclusive position of leisured financial freedom; whilst the desire when experiencing aerial performance is to feel the exceptional freedom of flight.

In the 1920s and early 1930s aerial glamour provided a fantasy of transformation whose mode of experience was aspirational and relied on glorification. Although transformation is a trope of the grotesque, it works quite differently to produce glamour’s flights of imagination. Bakhtin associates the grotesque with the lower parts of the body, including the sexual organs that generate life alongside other functions of the bodily strata such as defecation (1984, 26). As the receptacle of life, the ‘grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming’ (Bakhtin 1984, 24). It is not as simple as to say that the grotesque always includes disgust at the low public display of bodily functions and decay. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe how grotesque images ‘are both reviled and desired. Repugnance and fascination are the twin poles of the process’ (1986, 4, 5). However, to be grotesque an image must include both these, negative *and* positive, experiences and responses.

The experience of aspirational aerial glamour is most easily perceivable when witnessing aerial disciplines that travel horizontally through the space above, such as flying trapeze. This is the form people most commonly think of when imagining aerial performance or trapeze, and is where a flyer – grasping the fly-bar – casts themselves into space to be met by the catcher who hangs from a second bar. What is particularly alluring about this type of action is that the swing that is so integral to all aerial apparatus is accentuated through the combination of traversing space and speed. The swing is used by aerialists to make movements easier to undertake. It involves pushing the body forcefully in one direction to project it more strongly in the opposite direction, utilising both gravity and momentum. On the flying trapeze the effects of gravity and momentum are most visible in the catch, when the force of the flyer’s motion is equalised by gravity, creating a split-second pause that allows the catcher to grasp their wrists. Standing below, this instant appears as a desirable moment of graceful weightlessness that belies the training and effort required to undertake it. This appearance of aerial weightlessness was noted by one 1920s newspaper reporter who asked ‘How did Lillian Leitzel ‘break every law of gravity’ last night’ (‘Bigger and Better!’ 1925). Performing on roman rings and planche rope,⁵ where the swing is not always as immediately visible, her body was perceived as weightless.

Aerial activity works on the kinaesthetic system in a manner that moves beyond merely noting the appearance of weightlessness. Susan Leigh Foster has drawn dance theory and neurophysiology together to explore how movement elicits a historically situated emotional

and physiological response (2011, 107–125). She describes how the firing of mirror neurons occurs when someone undertakes a physical activity but also when they experience someone else performing it. The experience of witnessing the movement acts as a rehearsal in the kinaesthetic system whose active engagement with its environment includes – alongside visual stimuli – muscle, joint and cutaneous receptors, and the vestibular system. The latter is responsible for how we understand gravity and is also responsible for balance and spatial orientation (2011, 116). The kinaesthetic system is always learning and acquiring information – every motion witnessed or performed contributes to how subsequent motion is perceived. The way in which we perceive movement is through our own bodily histories, our own lived experience of movement. This is what makes experiencing dynamic movement in performance so engaging: it is a communal moment shared with other audience members but is experienced somatically as meaningful through our own bodily histories on a personal and individual basis.

This communal yet individually meaningful experience of witnessing aerial action is also tantalising because it plays with distance. In her aerial catching reception theory, Peta Tait analyses and describes the experience of witnessing aerial action using film theory, phenomenology and historical primary sources (2005, 141–152). Both Foster and Tait emphasise the role of lived experience in receiving movement in slightly different terms, but Tait's theory is particularly pertinent to this discussion because she illustrates it using circus specific examples. These descriptions explore both communal audience reactions, such as the involuntary holding of breath, and the differing levels of anxiety felt by individuals when witnessing the same aerial act (Tait 2005, 142, 143). Particularly relevant to this discussion of glamour is the way Tait highlights the role of distance when witnessing aerial movement, exploring how the body below imaginatively projects itself into the body above: 'a spectator viscerally perceives the physicality of another body (or bodies) in a process of oscillating identification and disidentification' (Tait 2005, 141). Although Tait primarily uses theory to explore this aspect of her argument, it can also be identified in the examples she provides: the involuntary holding of breath demonstrating a level of identification – or closeness – and disidentification is evident through the concern for another, separate – or distant – body.

Standing below that separate aerial body, I have found myself physically responding to the movements of a swinging trapeze artist by swaying back and forth at the same time as my mind imagines feeling the rise and fall of aerial action. Imaginatively I project my body as weightlessly free, whilst remaining aware I am separate through the weight travelling downwards through my feet. I imagine my body performing the very same movements, but I am aware that I am rooted to the ground. In this moment, there is a promise of transformation into the free body above through experiencing aerial action, the 'observing body becomes glorified momentarily in aerial motion' (Tait 2005, 150), whilst the separate position below can never quite be forgotten.

The role distance plays in experiencing aerial action is the same as in glamour. Ultimately both the reception of glamour and aerial performance promise an inaccessible escape: the experience provides an individual with the tantalising taste of what it might be to be glamorously free of everyday constraints, or to fly. The experience of glamour is frequently described in terms of apparently contradictory relationships to distance as an impossible availability of the subject: it is 'accessible exclusivity, democratic elitism', and 'accessibility and distance' (Gundle 2008, 12; Postrel 2013, 20). It is this complex relationship to distance that makes glamour so alluring because it pulls one in whilst simultaneously pushing away,

similarly, aerial action promises flight through identification whilst it leaves one stranded on the ground – all too aware of gravity's pull.

In the 1920s not only was distance found in aerial action, it was also found in the glamorous depiction of aerialists as aristocrats of the air. As the most prestigious aerialist of her generation Lillian Leitzel was widely known as 'Queen of the Circus' and was depicted in images that bear the sheen of glamour such as Figure 1. Sitting at a table covered with cosmetics, Leitzel smiles at the photographer whilst her maid, Mabel Clemings, attends to her hair. The picture holds a tension between intimacy and staging as it captures a backstage moment for public dissemination. The image is obviously a performance yet it alludes to being the reflection Leitzel would see in the mirror as she prepared for her act. Even



Figure 1. Photograph of Leitzel and her maid, Mabel Clemings, CWi 2573, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

though the staged nature of her gaze is deliberately set between seductive and demure, this combination draws the viewer in whilst keeping them at a safe distance.

Yet, what really prevents the audience from getting too close in this photograph and in performance was the representation of Leitzel as a leisured and wealthy aristocrat. The same *Billboard* writer who earlier in this article highlighted the spectacular Ringling-Barnum wardrobe, described her costume:

Of course you recognized that little elfin sprite balancing by one arm in mid-air. Yes, that's Lillian, golden-haired Lillian Leitzel, and her diminutive costume is in the loveliest shade of pale green studded with shimmering rhinestones and crystals. Rhinestone trimming decorates the belt, around the edges of the bodice and center strap. A long, flowing scarf of tulle draped over the shoulders of airy, fairy Lillian when she had finished her act. (Bennett 1930)

It is interesting that this description of costume succeeds in describing the shine of her body, through glittering clothing and bright hair, whilst simultaneously emphasising the weightlessness of 'airy, fairy Lillian'. Wearing costumes bedecked in jewels she entered the ring accompanied by her maid and footman (Bradna and Spence 1953, 149; Taylor 1956, 215). The role of both was to ensure Leitzel maintained an attractive appearance: her maid rearranging her clothes and hair, or her footman carrying her into the ring to protect her clothing from dirt on a particularly muddy day (Bradna and Spence 1953, 149; Kline 2008, 209). In performance, these subordinates contributed to the deliberate performance of Leitzel as an affluent circus aristocrat, despite her strenuous performance activity. Positioning herself as having the benefits of wealth presented her life as glamorously aspirational: her aerial action promised freedom from the constraints of gravity whilst it also secured a life of glittering costumes, maids and footmen – a life that was separate from the audience because it was free of financial concern.

Leitzel's portrayal in Figure 1 represents a transformation, but this is not Bakhtin's grotesque metamorphosis in progress as explained earlier in this essay. Here, the fantasy of transformation is a process experienced by the audience member rather than Leitzel. Her image is polished and her act was a complex interplay of virtuosity and expert showmanship that engaged her audience. In fact, the evidence needed to align Leitzel's act with the grotesque is flimsy: her vigorous activity would have resulted in the bodily function of sweat appearing against her skin, but only a few members of the audience who paid the highest ticket price would have been close enough to perceive it. Whilst sexuality is evident in both her costume and performance style, it was not gross, but an aspirational display of sexual desire and desirability. Leitzel appeared in costumes that exposed her arms, legs and midriff ('Leitzel's Pink Circus Costume', n.d.), but her performance style presented her as having control over the sexual encounter. Any man selected by her gaze was positioned as lucky:

With an arch look that seemed to mean, Miss Rooney [an aerial colleague] felt, 'I've noticed *you* in particular, anything can happen', she would kick off her mules slowly, as if in a prelude to something intensely personal, and men, quite literally often started from the stands (Taylor 1956, 221, emphasis in original).

Rather than being grotesque, Leitzel's sexual display is characterised by an assertiveness that epitomises glamour's 'confidence, empowerment, ... [it] articulates all that is *not* domestic, confined or suppressed' (Jacobowitz and Lippe 1992, 3 emphasis in original). This is not an image of transformation that relies on the grotesque's generative power but is an experience that offers the fictive promise of transformation into a glorified and aspirational body.

Desire for transgressive and excessive bodies

Although, ultimately, I am setting up an opposition between the experiences of glamour and the grotesque, this risks an over-simplification that deserves attention. This requires me to step away from the aerialists that are the focus of this study for a moment, to interrogate how ‘repugnance and fascination’ work within the grotesque in opposition to glamour. Although there is a transgressive nature to glamour, interrogating pleasures and desires alongside risk confirms that female aerialists are not an example of the female grotesque. Their transgression may have been risky, but it was glamorous by the standards of the 1920s in combining the traditionally designated attributes of ‘masculine’ strength with ‘feminine’ grace.

Fascination with the grotesque stems from the contamination it requires. Stallybrass and White identify within Bakhtin’s theory two types of grotesque and it is their second ‘hybrid grotesque’ that includes fascination (1984, 193). It works at the boundaries of what is acceptable by combining what is high with what is low to cause repugnance because pure images of abjection would not cause distaste in the same way. It is ‘the pleasure ... derive[d] from an *inverted world*, where the desired object must be of lower status, where dirt triumphs ... where ‘the bottom’ is the source of all delight’ (Stallybrass and White 1986, 168, emphasis in original). Here, delight and pleasure come from the grotesque’s promise of giving the individual the power to upturn rules. Yet, much of their work on the grotesque considers how it has been co-opted as a tool to gain authority or status for an individual or group of the middle classes. More importantly, it suggests that desire in the grotesque is intimately linked to power, authority or status over the Other-object so that it can be exploited. Glamour’s desire works in a significantly different fashion where the Other, although inaccessible, is positioned higher and as aspirational. The freedoms glamour promises are not linked to upturning the rules but in having the fictitious power that money, leisure and adulation provide within this capitalist world.

Working at the boundaries of what is acceptable always implies a risk. For Russo, risk is essential to images of the female grotesque. It is part of the generative nature of the female grotesque because a risk ‘leaves room for chance’ (1994, 11). The aerialist (whom Russo frustratingly conflates with the aviatrix) is grotesque because her riskiness is the ‘embodiment of possibility and of error’ (1994, 29). Whilst I agree with Russo that there is a productiveness to images of risky and unclassifiable women, circus performances require the right balance between risk and skill. There is always the real possibility of death but the narrative being sold is of skill ultimately conquering risk. Glamour and the grotesque are different because glamour pushes at the border, whilst the grotesque just oversteps it. The example of the film star and her iconic red lipstick provide a useful illustration. In the 1920s Britain, make up was becoming socially acceptable but bright colours risked censure (Dyhouse 2011, 84). The element of glamorous transgression in the film star’s application of such attention-grabbing colours comes from being willing to take a risk, for demanding attention, in a way that a British woman would not. Yet, the film star’s red lipstick is always perfectly applied and touched up. The risk for ordinary women was not only being looked at, but that the smudge might turn glamorous red lips into a gaudy and grotesque red mouth. In being bold enough to apply red lipstick there is a desire to be that icon and to transform oneself into the leisured film star, despite the dangers of appearing ostentatiously visible like the stereotype of the red-mouthed prostitute. In aerial performance the risk being taken

includes the real possibility of death, but this is framed as unlikely because skill promises the positively transformative experiential fiction of weightless flight.

One risky representation related to aerial action relies on the false dichotomy of femininity and masculinity. In the 1920s and early 1930s the stereotype of the modern girl (also known as the flapper) concerned conservative elements of society by blurring the boundary of the sexes as women cut their hair short and took more control over their lives (Kent 2009, 39). Aerial action relies on traditionally gendered 'masculine' strength and 'feminine' grace for movements to be performed efficiently. The appearance of grace comes from aerial action's apparent weightlessness, as well as extended arms and legs, which facilitate muscle engagement and constitute good aerial technique. Strength is required to hang, pull and push the body into position. Such movements require a higher level of bodily strength than is usual in women and which moulds more visible female upper body musculature. The very same movements performed by men are also capable of being performed by women, which has led Tait to describe aerial action as where 'double gendering' occurs (2005, 31), because it disturbs the traditional boundaries between gender.

In the early twentieth-century, glamour also disturbed such straightforward designations between femininity and masculinity in creating its allure. Although Jacobowitz and Lippe's article (1992) is too brief to represent a developed analysis of gender within glamour, it is useful for thinking about how femininity and masculinity worked within inter-war glamour. Their analysis of images of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich argues that soft and tactile surfaces were gendered as feminine and that masculinity was represented by the cut of clothing and hard shiny leather surfaces. This juxtaposition of the feminine and masculine worked together to 'redescribe the feminine without recourse to an ambiguous androgyny' (Jacobowitz and Lippe 1992, 4). What masculine cuts gave a female form was the frisson of excitement in disturbing the expected and pushing at the boundaries of what was acceptable.

The example of Dietrich is useful in considering how the attributes of traditional femininity and masculinity in a female form can push femininity into sharp relief, creating an excess. In *Morocco* (1930) Marlene Dietrich cross-dresses in a tuxedo as the cabaret artist Amy Jolly, to evoke desire for her female body from the audience both off and on screen. The fitted cut of Dietrich's tuxedo serves to highlight her figure, pinching in at her waist and skimming over her hips. Dressed with or without her frock coat, her breasts, as prime signifiers of femininity are emphasised either by the pocket-handkerchief that sits over one, or the waistcoat that cuts across the nipples and under the breasts. The top hat performs a similar trick; sitting on her head it emphasises that the unruly wavy bobbed haircut beneath it is not the traditional masculine hair you would expect to see under such an item of clothing. Amy Jolly creates glamour through juxtaposing femininity with masculinity to emphasise the female sexed body underneath – femininity is pushed into sharp relief by this redescription of what it is to be female. What emerges is not a heteronormative sexuality but one that is imbued with something more sensational because it pushes hard at the borders of acceptable feminine behaviour.

The combination of movement attributes that are traditionally gendered masculine and feminine within aerial action works in a similar manner. Strength as demonstrated by a woman, such as the diminutive Leitzel, disturbs expectations and perversely pushes femininity to the fore. It relies on this juxtaposition of traditionally gendered attributes undertaken by a sexually mature female body and creates a type of bodily excess that focuses attention on the sex and sexuality of the body. Aerial movement was intrinsically glamorous because

it balanced ‘feminine’ grace and ‘masculine’ strength in combination, and in doing so, highlighted the desirability of the male or female form. This aerial action resulted in an almost excessive femininity when undertaken by women like Leitzel.

Feminine muscularity

The bodily excess of glamorous aerial action generally derives from this combination of masculinity and femininity. However, bodies that supported such action were lauded for a similar glamour related to gender outside the moment of performance. It is the way in which aerial action sculpts the upper body, creating increased muscle mass, that suggests the grotesque. However, the grotesque relies on an excessiveness that is tied to the bodily strata. It is ‘excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices’ or ‘exaggerated body parts that completely hide the normal members of the body’ (Bakhtin 1984, 318, 328). The muscle developed by aerialists was not grotesque in obscuring feminine contours but was bulky enough to appear unusual. It is possible that the true extent of muscle may have been obscured by distance in the vast American circus tent; however it was directly addressed in press and publicity. Writers who admire female aerialists do not shy away from describing muscle and the Ringling-Barnum circus represented it in publicity images. What is fascinating is that muscle is often feminised in descriptions and representations. That is not to say that some writers did not express distaste towards the unusually defined feminine muscle of performers such as the Ringling-Barnum centre-ring star, Luisita Leers who performed for the world’s largest circus company from 1928 to 1933; these concerns demonstrate the powerful glamour of the circus space.

The glamour of inter-war aerial stars is strikingly illustrated by Figure 2. The youthful Luisita Leers beams at the camera, looking glamorous in her fashionable wavy bobbed hairstyle and deco earrings, whilst flexing her considerable bicep and trapezius muscles. Dressed in a tight top with medals pinned to her ample chest, she looks glamorous and she looks feminine. The cosmetic advertisement deliberately positioned on the right facing this image states ‘Lovely is She – *who knows these essentials to beauty!*’ and I find myself in agreement. This image highlights the extraordinary musculature Leers developed from her aerial practice and glories in it, glamorising it for audiences. This might be considered surprising because in the 1920s the increased participation of women in exercise caused a concern that female muscle would lead female bodies to become ‘a facsimile of the male body ... Rounded curves would be replaced by angular lines, softness by hardened muscle, and feminine refinement by bodily strength’ (Søland 2000, 50). It follows that Leers’ performances, demonstrating such a strong and muscular body should not have been considered feminine, but instead she is glorified in publicity.

The counter argument could be made that Leers was not being glamorised but that instead she was being presented as an intriguing freak – that she represented the ‘twin poles’ of repugnance and fascination. After all, Leers was described in the same programme as ‘The Wonder Girl. A youthful aerialist of prodigious strength and amazing skill in a twirling, whirling trapeze offering’ (RBBBC 1929a). The same or similar text was used to describe her act in other appearances at the Ringling-Barnum circus (RBBBC 1928a; 1928b; 1929b; 1930a; 1930b; 1931a; 1931b; 1932a; 1932b; 1933a; 1933b). One questionable reading is that the word ‘wonder’ is a euphemism for the experience of fascination in witnessing a grotesque body. This unlikely argument can be supported by an intertheatrical analysis, that considers

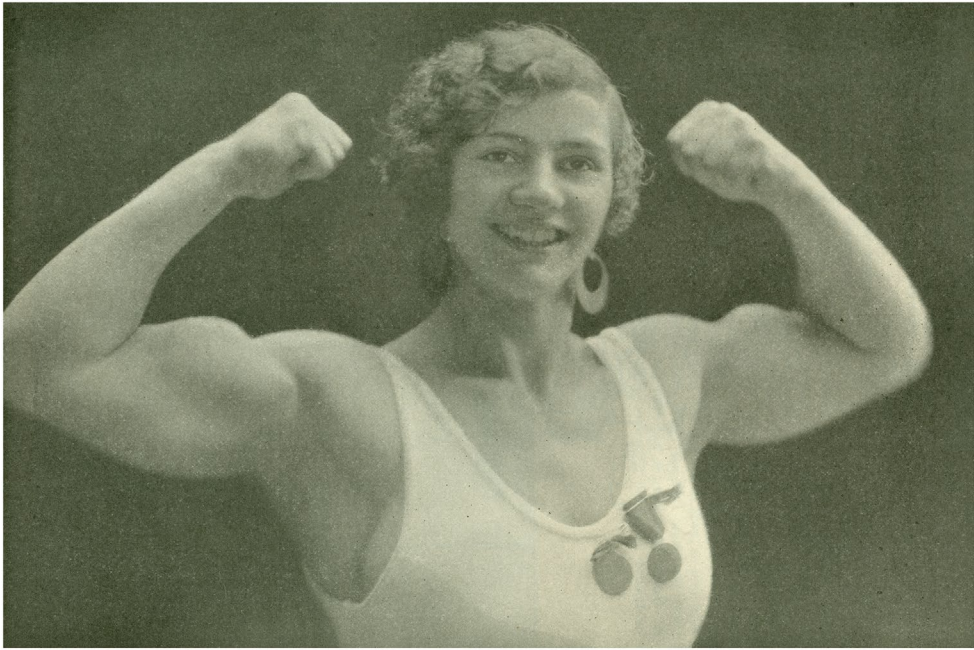


Figure 2. Luisita Leers feature image, 1929 road *Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Show Magazine and Dairy Review*, CWM Mss3, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

the 'expectations and disposition of the audience' to be found by analysing the playbill as a whole (Bratton 2003, 39). The Ringling-Barnum circus did exhibit non-normative and non-Anglo-European bodies in a separate space on the same site as the circus. However, an intertheatrical analysis that positions the female aerialist as a grotesque freak, because she performs on a wider site that includes the sideshow, is ultimately flawed. Such reasoning does not understand the fundamental nature of the circus ring. As has already been shown, the circus ring was a colourful, awe-inspiring and sensational popular entertainment that glorified its stars. Although the largest circuses did incorporate allied entertainments, such as the sideshow with its non-normative and non-Anglo-European bodies, in the 1920s and early 1930s these attractions were housed in a separate space. This was either within a separate tent when travelling America or in a separate part of either Madison Square Gardens or London Olympia, permanent venues temporarily inhabited by the Ringling-Barnum circus and Bertram Mills Circus for a short season. These separate spaces of exhibition were subject to their own performative conventions that encouraged a different mode of experience. Sideshow audiences scrutinised the grotesque body as an object rather than experiencing the glamorous bodily dialogue found in aerial action. Viewing a sideshow body did not involve the kinaesthetic fantasy that combined imagined feelings of weightlessness with an individual's awareness of their feet never leaving the ground. 'The Strange People' from the sideshow might parade through the big top to drum up publicity for their attractions, but they never inhabited it or transformed it through their performance practice (Whyte 2003, 31) – and, for this reason the freak's natural home was not the circus big top. The space created by the performance of circus practices was not one of freakishly grotesque fascination but was instead a glamorous space of glorification, excitement and laughter.

Helen Stoddart draws attention to the simplistic reading of the female aerialist as freak and offers a more subtle reading when discussing the representation of female aerialists in books and film. She states: 'The exceptional, in the realm of female achievement, may too easily be classified as the freakish or abnormal. The acrobat's body is potentially both awesomely and disturbingly physical' (2000, 176). Instead, Stoddart situates the aerialist with 'oddness' rather than freakery: 'This oddness is definitive of the circus body in general which is marked by the will to redefine and challenge what were seen as inherent physical limitations' (ibid). Although Stoddart's language risks tipping into that of the grotesque in describing it as 'disturbingly physical' her emphasis on oddness in opposition to freakishness is significant. Yes, there might be something unusual about the female aerialist's body, but that is not to consider it as freakish. Instead, oddness can be considered a feature of glamour because the glamorous person is not like us. They dare to take risks that most are not willing to take and, in doing so, they are odd, different and distant; oddness sets the glamorous personality apart from the ordinary person experiencing them below.

That is not to say that female aerialists' muscularity was not noticed and witnessed with some concern. Tait highlights how Leers' muscularity received attention in the street that questioned her femininity, whilst she was working at the Ringling-Barnum circus in 1933 (2005, 81). She also cites another example of unfavourable attention when Leers was working at the State Fairs in 1934 and 1937 where publicity displayed a strange relationship to her muscularity, positioning it as 'sexually alluring but an object of derision, despite Leers's demureness' (Tait 2005, 87). Tait considers the disconcerting potential of female muscularity, with its emphasis on traditionally masculine strength to 'disturb objectification, belie identity classification and confront orthodox configurations of sexual desire' (2005, 84), as at the heart of this contradiction. Although challenging the normal coordinates of gender is central to Leers' and other female aerialists' glamour in the period, the type of space in which she appeared is particularly relevant because both examples cited are unusual when viewed within the wider material gathered as part of my research. Significantly these examples are both outside the glamorous Ringling-Barnum circus context and appear as part of State Fairs or as Leers walked down the street. It is more conventional to find it said of Leers that: 'While retaining her feminine charms this youthful aerialist nevertheless displays prodigious strength and amazing endurance that any man would envy ('Luicita Leers, European Star' 1932; 'Young European' 1931; 'Luicita Leers, European Circus', n.d.). This more common description of Leers' body is one that positions her as feminine despite strength displayed through defined muscles. Men may envy her strength or muscles but that does not mean she is not feminine – in this more common example, muscle is not separated from femininity, it is mentioned in the same breath.

When read in light of the conventional positioning of Leers' body within circus press and publicity these unusually derisive examples say something interesting about space, glamour and the muscular female body. The State Fair was not the same type of space as the Ringling-Barnum circus space. Leers' act presented within an agricultural context, was not part of the Ringling-Barnum circus and its affluent associations with the city. Rather than being a glamorous space of glorification the State Fair was, by definition, rural and local. The Ringling-Barnum circus and its glamour provided protection for the extraordinarily muscular Leers that could not be generated by the State Fair or by the street. Walking down the street in a 'short-sleeved Summer dress' (in Tait 2005, 80), Leers was not immediately identified with the glamorous Ringling-Barnum circus. It would be interesting to know if

the same response to her body the writer expresses would have occurred if she was walking down the same street flanked by attendants, wearing her regal cloak and her circus costume. Here then, we get the closest to the circus aerialist representing Bakhtin's carnivalesque 'second life', where what was acceptable in the circus would not be accepted elsewhere. Yet again, the purpose of the Ringling-Barnum publicity was to engage in the glorification and glamorisation of its premier artists and celebrities. It is the glamour of the affluent Ringling-Barnum circus that protected Leers from derision, and extended the circus space into people's homes through publicity materials such as newspaper coverage and souvenir programmes – provided she was represented as urbanely glamorous.

It is tempting to situate Leers as a particularly excessive example of aerial female muscle, but the muscle of Leers' colleague Leitzel was also noticed. Leitzel was the pre-eminent circus celebrity of this period and her glamour extended well beyond the circus tent. Her image was reproduced in national publications, making it likely she would have been recognised on the street in America even if most audience members could not make out her features in the giant Ringling-Barnum tent. Despite her glorification, male memoir writers often describe her developed upper body in masculine terms. Quoting Roland Butler, memoir writer Robert Lewis Taylor states 'She had the shoulders of a professional wrestler, and her arms were steel bands' (1956, 219) whilst Ringling heir Henry Ringling North describes how despite being 'Exquisitely dainty and feminine, she had the shoulders of a Notre Dame tackle' (2008, 183). Like Leers, North's statement demonstrates that Leitzel's body was glorified for, and feminised whilst, displaying its muscularity. In fact, both Leers and Leitzel were glamorous because they juxtaposed traditionally 'masculine' upper body musculature within sexually mature female bodies adorned in 'feminine' costuming. This combination of traditionally gendered attributes within a glorified female star served to highlight the female sex of their bodies – the result being a bodily excess of glamorous femininity.

Female aerialists of the 1920s and early 1930s were glamorous, not grotesque. The most prestigious performers appeared in world-renowned circuses that generated aspirational glamour through publicity that glorified their star images. These circuses were glamorous in displaying their affluence and in programming acts that relied on skill to create aspirational wonder. This mode of experience is the core difference between glamour and the grotesque. The experience of glamour is not grotesque fascination and repugnance at a degraded object, it is more complicated. Glamour is transgressive and pushes at the boundaries of acceptability, which, if overstepped, results in a grotesque response. The Other is not simply to be looked down upon, glamour generates the type of wonder that is to be aspired to, even though it includes elements of transgression. However, if the affluent frame of cosmopolitan glorification is not present, as when Leers walked unaccompanied in the street, then glamour *can* desert the subject. Without the protective trappings of glamour the mode of experience runs the danger of slipping from glorification founded on transformation, transgression and excess to degradation, drawing on the very same themes. But, an aerialist can only be grotesque if they leave behind their practice because aerial action is intrinsically glamorous. Aerial action creates within the person watching it a fantasy of impossible projection that glorifies – glamour's allure is precisely this process of impossible positive identification. Aerialists were, and are, glamorous, because experiencing aerial motion is a fantasy of transformation into a free body unfettered from worldly constraints.

Notes

1. Ringling publicity misspelled her name as ‘Luicita’.
2. The Ringling-Barnum circus tent took audiences of approximately 10–15,000 twice daily (Dahlinger 2012, 224). Bertram Mills Circus audience capacity increased from 5000 when it opened in 1920 to 6500 by 1938, performing twice daily (BMC 1920; Williamson 1938, 216).
3. Other full-length works on glamour include Brown (2009), Dyhouse (2011), Gundle and Castelli (2006) and Postrel (2013). In particular, this article owes a debt to the transformative nature of glamour outlined by Dyhouse.
4. Thoughtfully edited by Janet M. Davis, aerialist Tiny Kline’s autobiography is a revealing and informative source on early twentieth-century American circus.
5. The planche rope is a rope with a loop at the bottom through which the wrist is slipped. It enabled Leitzel to complete the planche turns that made her famous, without her body hitting the tail of the rope as her body revolved around her wrist.

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